



ACCENT

OCTOBER 25, 1974

50c
*

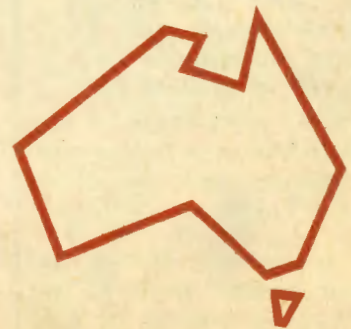
Briefing on Alan Renouf



What he said
about Connor

Politics on
the PM's jet

- ☐ Spring cleaning in
the Liberal Party
- ☐ Doug Everingham on
doctors and health



David Griffiths

Media for the Masses

Existing newspapers, television and radio stations are closed, elitist, segregated and exclusive. It's important to understand the nature of these limitations and how they inhibit the development of an alternative communications system that is participatory, accountable and accessible.

Closed, elitist, segregated and exclusive — these are emotional, provocative and judgmental words. They require explanation and definition, but I don't apologise for using them. By closed, I mean the established media is dominated by experts. This means in broadcasting, for instance, that the "quality" is more important than communication and accessibility. One group of people (managers, journalists, announcers and advertisers) define the framework and viewpoint of "good" radio, "good" television and "good" newspapers. "Good" is equated with "importance", "status" and "authority". "Good" radio tends to be defined as the smoothness, swiftness, articulateness and expensiveness of professional broadcasters.

By segregated, I mean that listeners, viewers and readers are quite isolated from the decision-making process which determines and implements policy. There is no meaningful interaction and exchange between the "disseminators" and the "receivers". This applies to the three areas of planning programs, controlling their content and their day to day operations.

By exclusive, I mean that the established media subtly reinforce the exclusion of the poor, the old, the young, blacks, migrants and other minority groups from their own society. But then the media hardly exist for these groups in any real sense but exist rather to affirm the normality of the middle class ethos — the institutionalisation of greed. Institutions tend to freeze people in tone and cliché. This distorts issues, leads to uniformity in style and prevents a flexible diverse approach. Have you noticed the station personality syndrome and how the announcers on any one station sound the same — whether it is 2SM, 3AW or the ABC?

The public and the media feed on each other's weaknesses. For example, the public holds certain popular expectations of radio stations — assumptions about what they sound like, what they should

say and what they should provide. Giving the public what it wants means giving the public what it is used to.

Unfortunately, this relationship between the public and the media should have been described and critically analysed by researchers in the mass media. This hasn't happened for four reasons: Firstly, established theories of communication are very primitive even though we have developed sophisticated research techniques; Secondly, descriptive research has prevailed over analytical research because social scientists hesitate to make value judgements about the world around them; Thirdly, research has tended to consist of a superficial before and after analysis of readers, viewers and listeners reactions. The real effect of the media on people and the community has been largely ignored; Finally, the media have been studied in isolation from the political, economic and social context in which they operate.

What are the possibilities for a democratic communications system? The possibilities are limited and limiting. As a prerequisite we need to establish a cultural philosophy that recognises that the movement towards cultural revolution must begin with an assault on the methods and ideology of the established mass media.

As I am speaking to you on an ABC program, I think it would be appropriate to discuss the ways in which the ABC itself is closed, elitist, segregated and exclusive. And contrary to what some people believe, I think that the similarities between the ABC and commercial radio networks are greater than their differences, which are peripheral and trivial. I do not accept an assumption which I expect is shared by listeners to this program and that is — that ABC radio is superior to commercial radio.

I believe that ABC Talks Programs should: Firstly, provide a meaningful analysis of events and issues; Secondly, explain and analyse conflicting ideas and beliefs; and Thirdly, present, clarify and assess the goals, values and institutions of society.

We then need to ask three questions about any of the news reports or interviews on the ABC news, AM, PM, or This Day Tonight. Does it enable people to make informed and intelligent decisions? Does it help people to understand the events being reported? Does it clarify or mystify the issues arising from these events?

The answers depend, of course, on a

whole series of inter-related assumptions about the comprehensiveness, context, relevance, balance and significance of each item. A careful examination of news and current affairs programs on the ABC radio and television reveals that they primarily concern specific provocative and outrageous individuals or events. This phenomenon is what Stuart Hall has called "actuality without context" — individuals and events divorced from their relevant context.

The ABC is generally not interested in discerning trends, explaining movements and in dealing with philosophical concepts because these are ambiguous, imprecise and complex. The consequence is a plethora of distorted news items and interviews based on misunderstandings and misperceptions — news stories and interviews about conflicts, accidents, tragedies, deaths, crises, confrontations and violence. These are ritualistically separated from the complex interplay of social, economic and political factors contributing to the events reported.

Next time you listen to AM, for example, note the aggressive, petulant and insensitive style of the interviewers and ask yourselves whether such a conflict orientation is compatible with being informative. I suggest that this conflict style isn't, and in fact leads to misinformation, inaccuracy and distortion. Therefore the "penetrating" and "insightful" questions asked on current affairs programs are in fact trivial and often offensive.

Individually the reporters no doubt reflect the range of human types, but they have equally become victims of the conflict syndrome. The questions asked are typical of reflex journalism — opinion offered as fact, undocumented assertions open to question, unsupported opinion, unsupportable opinion, neglect of relevant details, inexact terminology and accuracy sacrificed for rhetorical effectiveness.

The consequence of all this is a mischievousness that divorces events and issues from the context which would make the events and issues understandable. But, then, it could be argued that through programs such as the 1974 series of Heresies the ABC is in fact allowing people to put their point of view in their own way and in their own time.

Before congratulating the ABC on its tolerance and generosity it would be useful to examine this assumption.

I suggest that the Heresies program serves two useful functions: Firstly, a series like Heresies is lost, obscured and defeated by the context in which it operates. The information-entertainment mix on the ABC blurs the lines between the trivial and the serious, the important and the unimportant, the real and the artificial. Secondly, programs like Heresies and Lateline are the ABC's token concession to radical, dissenting and minority

David Griffiths is research officer for the Brotherhood of St Lawrence in Melbourne. This article is a transcript of a talk he gave recently on the ABC program Heresies.

views. Such programs serve the function of co-opting, silencing, and perhaps even rehabilitating, the bizarre and provocative views of opponents of the status quo. This has a twofold effect of proving the tolerance of the ABC and compromising the critics.

Another point I would like to take up is the personality-oriented role of the mass media: the more an event can be seen in personal terms, as due to the action of specific individuals, the greater the probability that it will become a news item, that it will be discussed, mentioned and debated. Events and issues are frequently reported, interpreted and discussed in terms of an individual's success or failure. Personalising news and current affairs is a method of angling news and current affairs. The media creates celebrities: celebrities, according to Daniel Boorstin, are persons who are known for their well-knownness.

The media create two complementary celebrities: Firstly, there is the celebrity in the news report, the interview or discussion, for example, Bob Hawke, Gough Whitlam, John Halfpenny or John Gorton. Secondly, there is the celebrity who presents the news report, or conducts the interview or discussion, for example, Bill Peach, James Dibble, Peter Evans and Iain Findley.

Radio programs — whether they be

news, current affairs or musical cum chit chat — are vehicles for celebrities who have well-known, well-modulated and controversial middle-class voices, and who know how to talk fluently, politely and articulately.

In essence these arguments summarise why we should be concerned about the nature and future of the ABC. If we are to have a democratic communications system then in a broadcasting monolith such as the ABC, there should be a variety of channels through which views and events are communicated freely. At present there is a serious discrepancy between the objective and the practice. Self-styled communication specialists within the ABC have established a right to define what should be communicated, how it should be communicated and the terms of that communication.

Every society has self-perpetuating and self-justifying tendencies which are institutionalised by a power structure — consisting of centralised bureaucratic institutions that form a mutually accrediting establishment of decision makers. The ABC is one of these institutions and its staff are either apologists or accomplices to this fact.

With apologies to Paul Goodman, the sad truth is that the ABC operates to keep people working and people work to keep the ABC operating. This is not funny. □

Keith D. Suter

Ireland's Other Side

It takes the worst situations to bring out the best in people. The work done by organisations to bring about reconciliation in Ireland is an example. It is ignored by the foreign mass media, almost totally concerned with accounts of Northern Ireland's murders, tortures and bombings which give the public an impression that these are the only events. If this were true to the extent implied by the media there would be little left of Northern Ireland. But it is not. Despite the violence, people try to lead normal lives and, according to one estimate, about 75% of the Northern Ireland population have never seen a riot, a bomb, or a bullet.

One of the most impressive features of the work for community reconciliation has been its spontaneity. Individuals have realised independently that some-

thing must be done to bring the warring communities together and have ventured out on a number of projects. Just how many it is difficult to say. One estimate has as many as 80 organisations working in Belfast, a city of about half a million people. The range of activities is equally wide. It is also impossible to assess the impact of these efforts on the people. Those responsible for violence can at least total up their score at the end of each week. But those working for reconciliation cannot see at the end of any week any tangible results of their efforts.

One intangible aspect of their work concerns the easing of nervous tensions. Living in Northern Ireland has always been a strain for Roman Catholics because of the injustices they have had to suffer. Since the violence began in 1968, the strain has increased and spread to the Protestants. Even though the kill ratio is not as high as the mass media imply (it is on a par with that of NSW motorists) there is always the feeling that the next second could be one's last. Nerves are

frayed further by security precautions, continuously in force, which mean being woken most nights by a bomb scare or the sound of shooting. Tempers are short. Temporary stoppages of services because of bombings or strikes add to the tension.

What many people need is a good rest, the chance to get away from the violence. Working on the problem is an organisation called the Corrymeela Community. It grew out of a series of informal meetings in the winter of 1964-65, before the present conflict began. It is an inter-denominational Christian group which tries to bring Protestants and Catholics together. The Community centre itself, about 60 miles from Belfast on the pleasant North Antrim coast, consists of accommodation for work camps (for example, young people helping senior citizens, handicapped and educationally subnormal people to have holidays) and conferences to discuss Christianity and politics. The idea has caught on and centres are being opened up throughout Northern Ireland.

An alarming aspect of the Northern Ireland conflict which tends to be overlooked by the media, is that if the fighting were to stop today, some violence would go on. For six years, young people have grown up thinking that it is quite natural (indeed being encouraged by their parents) to throw rocks and bombs. Since the troops are reluctant to tackle children (it is bad for their 'image') the children have played a role and assumed a level of importance in their parents' eyes which is underestimated. One aim of the Corrymeela Community is to allow children to get out of the combat zones, where many of them are on tranquilizers, for a short rest. A more long-term aim is to show them that they can be socially useful in more ways than by being guerrilla fighters.

To counteract the media coverage, Peace Point was created in July last year as a news service for organisations working for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland: a 'good news' agency. It has branches both north and south of the border. Peace Point tries to refute the image of hopelessness created by bad news. It collects news from about 300 organisations and issues it to the media.

Peace Point accepts no money from Government agencies (the Dublin Government has been particularly keen to provide it). Since it is non-sectarian, it wants no risk of appearing sectional. Similarly, Peace Point is non-political and avoids issues like internment. Peace Point now issues news items at the rate of one a day. But the mass media have spent the last few years reporting so much gloomy and gory news from Northern Ireland that they find it hard to accept that there are happier stories. Having established the trend of bad news, they now seem to feel obliged to continue it. □

Mr Suter, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Government, Sydney University, visited Ireland recently to collect material for his thesis.